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Community Seed Banks: Origins, Evolution and Prospects

Charles Francis

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, cfrancis2@unl.edu

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Community Seed Banks: Origins, Evolution and Prospects

R. Vernooy, P. Shrestha, and B. Sthapit, Editors.
Routledge- Taylor & Francis Group, New York. 2015.
Paperback. 270 pp. \$53.95. ISBN 978-0-415-70806-7.

As a survey of contemporary community-level seed banks, this is an excellent compilation and instructive guide. The first section provides an overview of how seed banks originated, their varied goals and activities, several contrasting forms of management, and how they organize and perform to meet these goals. An intriguing claim in the book is that the concept of “seed banks is only some three decades old,” while in fact the practice of saving, preserving, and exchanging seed within a community is probably as old as human communities themselves.

Organized seed banks often serve specific functions: preserving seeds, providing seed access for members of the community, generating a degree of food security and food sovereignty, or some combination of these. There are different levels of participation and types of governance, with most involving some degree of direct involvement by farmers in the planting, conditioning, and storing of seed, and maintaining the seed-bank facility. These depend on the crop, the shared goals of the seed community participants, and the available resources.

Governance also varies among the community seed banks described and may depend on source of financing, including (i) external support and direction from non-governmental organizations, (ii) public-sector government management, (iii) local financing and governance by an elected committee, or (iv) all volunteer management and work using local resources and facilities. Among the decisions that are essential to success are deciding what materials to collect and increase, how to handle the collections and maintain them disease-free, how much information is needed about the provenance of each collection and what data to collect and save, what quantities of seed are needed to meet the goals of the group and how

diversity is to be maintained, and how much seed can be provided to each member or to non-members and under what conditions.

Another important dimension is the degree of national control and the legal framework within which the community operates. This is highly variable, from essentially no control to strict laws about the labeling, terms of distribution, and status of the community groups. The concerns of countries also vary, from competition with the private sector (China), importance of farmers' rights (India and Ethiopia), adherence to national seed certification laws (several countries), and acceptance of foreign involvement and financing [Norway Development Fund and USC (Unitarian Service Committee) in Canada]. Throughout the book and the examples presented, there is focus on the role of women who have traditionally been involved in seed selection and saving.

One of the valuable elements of the second part of the book that includes 35 case studies is the consistent format across chapters, which allows comparisons of the seed banks among countries. The goals of each cooperative are described—for example, in Bangladesh the addition of education and efforts to reduce chemical use. In Bolivia, the seed group described differences between male members who were most concerned with production levels and economics, while the women focused on seed and cooking qualities. In Brazil, there was strong interest in the rights of indigenous groups, and in Canada, an expressed concern that seed should be publicly owned. It is surprising to see no reference to seed patents, limited attention to the role of multinational seed companies, and the impacts these forces have had on the entire global seed situation and how this impacts seed and food sovereignty.

Community Seed Banks is an important resource for those interested in international agricultural development

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and how to find the most appropriate technologies. More than 100 authors contributed to this overview. It will be of special interest to plant breeders and to those involved in crop improvement in the developing world.

Charles Francis★

*Dep. of Agronomy & Horticulture
Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588*

★Corresponding author (cfrancis2@unl.edu)